

Is the Marine Corps Prepared to Conduct Operations in
Afghanistan?

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to

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The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James Conway, put forward a proposal in the fall of 2007 for the Marine Corps to assume the US mission in Afghanistan and hand over security operations in the Iraq province of Al Anbar to the US Army¹. One of the key arguments of his proposal is this: as the US presence in Iraq continues, the mission is increasingly becoming an effort for long term security forces and not a mission designed for an expeditionary force as the Marines traditionally operate. With the Marine's involvement in current operations in Al Anbar, the Corps' training and preparation have been focused on the Iraq security mission. This negates the Marine Corps ability to effectively maintain its concentration on its expeditionary nature as would be characteristic of operations in Afghanistan. With the Marine Corps' focus on the Iraqi theater of operations over the last four years, it must return to its expeditionary nature and redirect its efforts on training and equipping to operate effectively in Afghanistan.

¹ Walker, Mark. (2007, October 20). Marines contemplate move from Anbar to Afghanistan. North County Times. Retrieved December 15, 2007, from http://www.nctimes.com/articles/2007/10/21/news/top_stories/19_30_5310_20_07.txt

Current Operations

With the decreasing levels of violence throughout the Al Anbar province coupled with the success of the Iraqi Security Forces, the focus of the Marine mission has become increasingly less kinetic. The focus has shifted from rebuilding Iraqi Security Forces and civil-military operations with an overarching mission to conduct long term security operations. In addition, both the longevity of the operation and the specific environment of the country have forced the Marine Corps to focus its efforts on a specific threat and tailor itself to that end. As a result, the Marine Corps has shifted away from its expeditionary nature and reflects more of a "second land army" operating in Iraq.

Iraqi Theater Effects

With the long term efforts in Iraq, US forces have developed a permanent, reliable, and robust support structure outside the normal operating environment and inherent capabilities of Marine Corps logistics. This has resulted in a Marine Corps that is conditioned to rely on operating with a support structure not designed for its

expeditionary nature. In addition, the long term presence of US forces in Iraq has resulted in static and permanent operating bases. These positions are heavily laden with communication and engineering assets that negate the mobile aspects of Marine units. Lastly, the effects of the specific environment of Iraq itself have focused the Corps' on very specific combat modes of operation. The Iraqi environment is one that focuses efforts on urban operations, units operating within relatively close proximity to adjacent forces, and heavy reliance on armored vehicular assets. As a result of the security mission focus, longevity of the operation, and specific environment in Iraq the Marine Corps is increasingly tailoring itself to that mission at the loss of its overall expeditionary combat focus, a focus which relies on light infantry.

The impact of Iraq on the Marine Corps nature as an infantry force is most clearly seen in its training and equipping of forces. This impact is demonstrated during the pre-deployment training cycle for infantry battalions. With a one-to-one dwell ratio for deployed infantry units and deployment tour of seven months, a unit has essentially a 6th month training period when post-deployment leave is factored in. During this compressed time period, the unit

must necessarily focus on the current operating environment to both prepare for their cumulative training period at Mojave Viper and to educate new Marines on counter-insurgency (COIN) skills not taught through entry-level training. Essentially those skills taught at Mojave Viper have become the focus of Marine combat skills through this period to the detriment of light infantry skills.

The current period of instruction for Mojave viper focuses on urban warfare and mounted operations within a security environment as seen in operations in Iraq. As stated in the Tactical Training Exercise Control Group (TTECG) command brief, "Mojave Viper is a TRAINING EXERCISE that provides a Mission Rehearsal across all applicable Lines of operations based on likely employment in OIF."² As such, units preparing for Mojave Viper focus on very specific pre-deployment training objective to ensure their success. While these skills are necessary for the current operating environment, they are not necessarily conducive to developing and maintaining a light infantry force.

² Lt Col Williams C.J. (2007). Mojave Viper Command Brief Retrieved December 15, 2007, from [https://www.29palms.usmc.mil/base/ttecg/CB/TTECG%20Command%20Brief.ppt#256,1,Mojave Viper Pre-Deployment Training](https://www.29palms.usmc.mil/base/ttecg/CB/TTECG%20Command%20Brief.ppt#256,1,Mojave%20Viper%20Pre-Deployment%20Training)

The overall shift in preparation for the current fight is not only reflected in the training Marine units receive but also how they are equipped. With mounted operations being a constant mission in Iraq, the Marine infantry units are operating Hardback HMMV in numbers far above the authorized equipment inventories for their units. As such, Marine units have come accustomed to operating in a manner that relies on their armor, speed, communications equipment, and navigational sets that would not be present in a largely foot mobile environment. As a result, the Marine Corps has lost its emphasis on researching and acquiring equipment items that better enhance the foot-mobile fighter. This continuing trend can be seen in the Marine Corps recent purchase of the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle (MRAP). While the MRAP does provide greater protection from Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), its weight and size prevent it from being utilized as a rapidly deployable asset to another theater. By Marine Corps doctrine, the Corps' equipment must be expeditionary and easily deployed throughout the world to maintain our ability as a "force in readiness". The Commandant of the Marine Corps has recently cut the purchases of MRAPs in

half recognizing the overzealous level of equipment focus on the current fight. The continuing focus on equipment that supports the current fight without maintaining an interest in the foot-mobile capability of the Infantry limits the Marine Corps in its ability to be prepared for other operating environments.

Afghanistan Requirements

With the Commandant's recent proposal to commit US Marines to combat operations in Afghanistan we must be prepared to operate in its unique environment in contrast to current operations in Al Anbar. Unlike Iraq, violence in Afghanistan has increased in recent months; the violence is currently at its highest level since the fall of the Taliban in 2001.³ As a result, the situation is becoming increasingly kinetic throughout the eastern and southern provinces of Afghanistan. These kinetic combat operations

³ Walker, Mark. (2007, October 20). Marines contemplate move from Anbar to Afghanistan. North County Times. Retrieved December 15, 2007, from http://www.nctimes.com/articles/2007/10/21/news/top_stories/19_30_5310_20_07.txt

are traditionally more in line with the expeditionary infantry operations in contrast to Iraq's security focus.

In addition to the increasingly kinetic nature of the Afghanistan campaign it remains, in many regards, an expeditionary mission for the light infantry. A key reason for this is geographical characteristics of the country. With its size, low population density, difficult terrain and porous borders with Pakistan, few military operations are conducted directly from firm base locations. Most combat operations in Afghanistan occur in isolated areas that are not routinely subject to a US presence, particularly from the supporting capabilities the infantry relies upon. As a result, most combat operations require an ability to operate expeditiously with limited access to re-supply, artillery and armor support, and vehicle assets in large portions of the country. The majority of combat operations in Afghanistan occur in mountainous, high altitude, and remote isolated villages. To operate effectively in this environment Marines must be well trained and equipped to operate in small and foot mobile units.

Current Force Capability Shortfalls

To successfully fight in Afghanistan, the Marine Corps must make significant changes to its current training focus for both unit and individual skills. Following the completion of their deployment to Afghanistan in 2005 - 2006, 2nd Battalion, 3d Marines commented on their training in their After Action Report.

The training 2/3 received for Afghanistan was largely oriented towards Iraq. Afghanistan is much different than Iraq and pre-deployment training for Afghanistan needs to be tailored for the mission in Afghanistan. A "cookie cutter, one size fits all" training program should not be implemented for the Iraq and Afghanistan AORs, since there is a great deal not in common between the two theaters.

In Afghanistan artillery call for fire missions were common, as such; this should be stressed in pre-deployment training. The fighting in Afghanistan often took place in rural mountainous environment at high altitudes while most of Iraq was flat and in an urban scenario. The ranges of most firefights in Iraq are

close, often less than 300 meters while in Afghanistan they are 500-1500 meters and beyond.⁴

In addition to recognizing the large scale unit needs for pre-deployment training, the AAR also recognized the requirements for individual training such as call for fire and long range marksmanship. Once some of the hallmarks of Marine training, with our current focus these are missing components of light infantry skills for our Marines. Given the Afghan terrain and enemy, the environment ideally suited for small unit, foot mobile, and self-sufficient infantry units. These require many skills that are not currently addressed in our training packages such as long range patrolling, endurance hikes and ambushes. This is reflected in further portions of the 2/3 AAR.

The majority of the combat operations in Afghanistan were in extreme mountainous terrain. Due to lack of helicopter support Marines had to operate independently in steep mountain environments carrying heavy loads. Marines needed more mental and physical

⁴ Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned (2006, March 7). 2/3 After Action Report Afghanistan. Retrieved December 15, 2007, from <https://www.mccll.usmc.mil/index.cfm?disp=lms.cfm&doit=view&lmsid=40558>

preparation for this in their pre-deployment training. Marines were sent on long duration combat operations where they climbed up and down mountains for up to 2 weeks straight carrying full loads. Many of the Marines complained that their time in Bridgeport/29 Palms/Matilda village could have been better spent spending longer periods in the mountains carrying heavy packs conducting patrols, ambushes and hasty attacks in harsh steep mountains. Instead they were sent to classes on MOUT, and other Iraqi/Arabic specific training during their precious, limited, pre-deployment, training period. They arrived in Afghanistan facing enormous mountains as well as an experienced determined enemy with very little appropriate training. Marines, with time, grew accustomed to their environment but this should have been done in a training environment not under combat conditions.⁵

Small unit infantry operations have equipment needs that differ significantly from Iraqi theater operations as

⁵ Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned (2006, March 7). 2/3 After Action Report Afghanistan. Retrieved December 15, 2007, from <https://www.mccll.usmc.mil/index.cfm?disp=lms.cfm&doit=view&lmsid=40558>

well. An example would be sustainment requirements for water in field operations during the summer months. The need to carry extreme amounts of water for hydration in mountainous terrain inhibits a unit's ability to rapidly maneuver on the battlefield. Current operating procedures stockpile water supplies at forward operating bases, which would not be readily available in Afghanistan. Aerial supply is not always available due to weather and isolated terrain at altitude. Many units have recommended that the Marine Corps purchase hand held water purification devices for use by infantry units. However, the Marine Corps has made no efforts to source such items that would be needed in large supply for such an operation.

Similar deficiencies exist in numerous light infantry equipment needed for Afghanistan. Medical treatment requires a more substantial first aid kit that allows for longer sustainment because of extended MEDEVAC times. A greater number of long range communication assets would need to be acquired for small unit patrolling. A lighter, more adaptable SAPI (Small Arms Protective Insert) plate carrier for patrolling separate from the cumbersome Medium Tactical Vest used in Iraq would need to be acquired. Current Marine boots lack the ankle support necessary to

conduct climbing and assault operations on steep mountainous terrain. Many of these are off the shelf technology that are available, but the Marine Corps needs to begin a substantial procurement process if they are to be available to the warfighter in time for mass re-deployments.

Conclusion

With the continuation of the "Long War" and, more specifically, combat operations in Iraq - the Marine Corps is increasingly becoming focused on specific security operations in Al Anbar. As the nation's "Force in Readiness" the Marine Corps has always been expected to maintain the ability to fight on any battlefield and any place where the nation's interest are at stake. To accomplish this, the Marines always maintained a flexibility of focus and mastery of the basic dynamics of combat to achieve that goal. If the Marines are to be prepared for other operations and theaters, they must recognize the impact Iraq has had on the institution and be prepared to address the resulting deficiencies. A generation of Marines has known only war in Iraq. If the Marine Corps were to conduct operations in Afghanistan, it

would have to recognize that its forces are not currently trained or equipped to operate there as light infantry.

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